



## Resilient Teaching for Blended Learning

Alistair Hamill

*Lurgan College*

It's good to be back in the classroom. Despite all the differences, the changes in seating plans, the social distancing that means you can't interact with the classes as much, the moving around classrooms, the mask wearing — despite it all, it's good to be back. To be interacting with real human beings, asking questions, responding to the pupils' quizzical looks when something doesn't quite make sense to them, and fostering those relationships again which are the heartbeat of what makes this job so rewarding.

But it's already exhausting. Teaching face to face is a full time job, taking not only most of your time, but also much of your energy. There doesn't feel like a lot of capacity for something else.

But earlier this year, when we were teaching from home, which felt like more than a full time job too. All those videos we had to record (and perhaps re-record if the first takes weren't quite right), and all of the emails sent chasing up pupils who were not engaging as much as we would like. There didn't feel like much extra capacity there, either.

Two full time jobs, thankfully not running synchronously.

And yet, it didn't take long for the impacts of the second great disruption to hit us in schools: the need to continue to teach the pupils in front us of at the same time as supporting pupils who are having to self-isolate at home. Face-to-face teaching, and distance learning, running concurrently.

The more I considered this reality in early August, the more I realised that, should we try to do both, it would not be sustainable for the most important resource in any school: the teachers.

And so, two core principles governed planning for our school this year: (1) preserve the continuity of learning for any and all pupils having to miss school due to self-isolation and (2) make this sustainable for teachers. But would it be at all possible to find a way of balancing two things that seemed, at best, to be in tension with each other?

It was finding a different definition of an old term that gave me the spark of inspiration. In exploring how we could make schools as resilient as possible in the face of the inevitable further disruptions this year, I came across [C. S. Holling's definition](#) from the field of environmental science, adapted here for educational purposes:

Resilience is a measure of the persistence of classroom systems and their ability to absorb change and disturbance and still maintain the same relationships between the elements.

What is striking about this definition is the corporate nature of the term (resilience is as much a systemic thing as it is a personal thing) and its focus on relationships. One of the best things about being back in the physical classroom is the restoration of those relationships. The interactivity that is key to the art of teaching, the to and fro of question and answer, the ability to be able to respond to the responses of your pupils. Periods of self-isolation help to fracture those relationships.

So how do we design our classroom systems in such a way that we are able to maintain relationships, even with pupils not there? In short: how do we make our teaching resilient?

To have a hope of doing so, we need to begin to tweak our current classroom practices to bring about such resilience, beginning with the question:

What strategies are you currently using in your face to face classes that would allow for seamless transition into a blended learning format?

The idea was to modify our practice now, and to make those modifications clear and explicit to the pupils, so that, when disruption hit, we were ready. We knew what strategies would support our two core principles of continuity of learning for pupils and sustainability for teachers. We had been using them in class so we were all used to them, and the pupils knew exactly what we expected of them should they be off.

It didn't take too long, even before the Covid-related absences started to hit, for our approach to be put to the test, of course, and it has proven highly effective overall. Pupils continue to learn; staff feel in control; and, an unforeseen added benefit, the pupils sitting in the class see us being able to support pupils at home, and it gives them reassurance and comfort. Whatever this year throws at us, we'll be ready.

What are those strategies we've been working on? Space doesn't allow an in depth exploration of them all, but let me try to give you a flavour of some.

### Learning Log

In many ways this is the simplest and easiest to apply, and yet one of the most effective. During lockdown, with my GCSE classes, I planned out the week's work in advance and shared it with the pupils via Google Docs. We had asked them to mirror their timetables at home, and I simply added in the instructions of what they had to do and when. It worked very well, and we quickly decided in our department to continue with this in September, even before the impacts of absence hit.

In the school setting, using the learning log began to foster a culture of increased responsibility and agency with the pupils. The core of the learning takes place in the lessons, of course. But that sits on an ongoing foundation of learning by the pupils, guiding them in the work they should be doing outside of class.

We started to notice the impacts on pupils who had been off for a day or two for non-Covid issues. The answer to the question ‘Are you caught up yet?’ increasingly became, ‘Yes, I checked the learning log, and I’m up to date.’

Towards the end of lockdown, Dr Noel Purdy of Stranmillis Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU) and I wrote a blog. In it we argued that there was an opportunity to learn from the positive experiences of pupils who had thrived during lockdown learning and “where possible and appropriate, to seek to learn from and use their positive experiences to promote better learning dispositions among the wider peer group.” In other words, we have a chance to reflect more deeply on how we frame the learning experience so that we don’t just produce compliant learners, but agentic learners, encouraging pupils to take responsibility for and ownership of their learning. And we are finding that the learning log is helping to that end.

And, of course, as the Covid-related absences soon began to take effect, this was already in place. A ready means to communicate with all the pupils, whether they were learning in the school or at home. A resilient strategy.

#### The Digital Jotter and Synchronous Delivery:

There was considerable debate during lockdown about the management of synchronous and asynchronous delivery of remote lessons. Since returning to school, we have sought simple and manageable ways of achieving synchronous lesson delivery that works for pupils in the school or at home.

One of those is through the digital jotter, using the synchronous interactivity offered by Google Slides to replace my much beloved mini whiteboards. In class, the digital jotter can be used for a variety of purposes, such as retrieval practice, peer assessment, concurrent feedback to the pupils. As we have an open Bring Your Own Device policy which allows our pupils to use their phones in class, it has been of use as we have to maintain social distancing from the pupils.

But it has also worked seamlessly with our pupils working from home. They can access the slides at the same time as the pupils in class, and they can do the tasks with them and get feedback from the teacher too. In fact, in our most successful application of this so far, our Head of History managed to use this with one of his Y13 pupils who was stuck in Pakistan after visiting family over half term. Maintaining the relationship between the elements when one of those elements is almost 4000 miles away in a different continent? That’s what I call resilient teaching! (Further examples of our work can be found in [this presentation](#) from ResearchED, Surrey, in October 2020.)

In this time of unprecedented challenge, there are creative and innovative solutions bubbling up across many schools in the country which can, ultimately, promote resilient teaching and learning in schools. But, because teachers are busy, tired and stressed, now more than ever, we need to work to capture and share examples of interesting practice in order to connect and support teachers.

*Alistair Hamill is Senior Leader for Teaching and Learning in Lurgan College.*